

The Downsview Park International Design Competition

by David Oleson OAA, FRAIC

The exciting conclusion of an international design competition was announced on 26 May. The purpose of this competition was to create a new vision for the lands comprising 320 acres of the former Canadian Forces Base Toronto, at Downsview. Five multi-disciplinary teams were short-listed in the first stage, chosen from 179 entries submitted from 22 countries. The winning design, selected from the five anonymous finalist schemes was produced by a team composed of Rem Koolhaas (of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture in Rotterdam), Petra Blaisse (of Inside/Outside in Amsterdam), and the Toronto firms Bruce Mau Design and Oleson Worland Architect.

Launched in July 1999, The Downsview Park International Design Competition is the first major international design competition to be held in the city of Toronto since 1958. It marks the beginning of one of the most exciting and ambitious urban initiatives in Canada. The aim of the design is to create an urban park that sets the twenty-first century standard for excellence in landscape, architectural design and urban recreational planning, and is a place for people of all ages to enjoy.

The competition was sponsored by CLC Downsview Inc. (a crown corporation overseeing the disposition of the Downsview lands), was organized by Detlef Mertins, Architect, as the Professional Advisor, and was adjudicated by a distinguished jury including Kurt Forster (Director of the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal), Ydessa Hendeles (director and curator of the Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation in Toronto), Cornelia Hahn Oberlander (one of Canada's most accomplished and respected landscape architects, from Vancouver), Terence Riley (Chief Curator of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City), and Gerald Sheff (chairman and chief executive officer of Gluskin Sheff + Associates in Toronto).

Construction of the Park is planned to be implemented in stages over a 15-year time period. The Tree City design is distinguished by an approach that focuses on nature in the first stage, instead of buildings (even though there are a number of spectacular existing aircraft and hanger buildings on site, which will be renovated and put to new uses as the plan develops). The scheme is composed of a matrix of circular tree clusters covering approximately 25% of the site, supplemented by meadows, playing fields and gardens. The Park's clusters are complemented by 1000 crossing paths

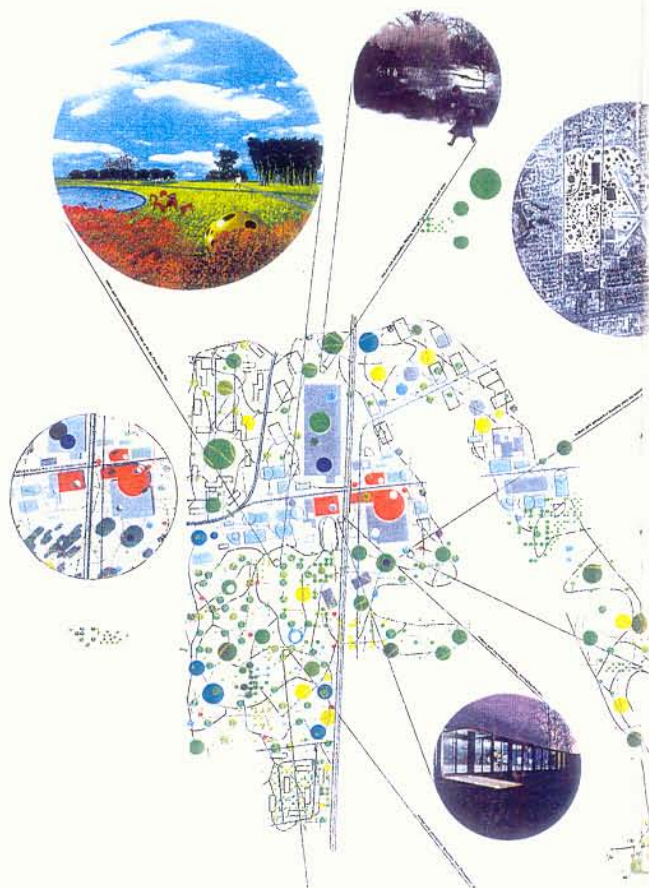
to be used by cyclists, joggers and pedestrians.

The Tree City submission has as its primary themes:

1. Grow the Park — to plant the seeds for environmental expansion beyond the site boundaries via adjacent ravines and river valley systems.
2. Manufacture Nature — instead of attempting to restore Downsview to a previous natural state, to manufacture nature for civic ends — a fabricated landscape designed primarily to orchestrate on-site leisure, transportation and commercial activities.
3. Curate Culture — recreational, cultural and commercial activities will be assigned over the park's life to maximize its options for survival.
4. 1000 Pathways — to provide a series of trails over the entire park offering an inexhaustible array of experiences for even the most frequent user.
5. Destination and Dispersal — synchronized for leisurely use and low-stress departure; providing linkages to transportation systems, ravines and local institutions such as York University.
6. Sacrifice and Save — the landscape will receive the top priority; nature will set the context for future buildings, both physically and fiscally.

The ecological strategy for the park, developed in conjunction with horticulturist Horst Dickert and ecological planner Martina Juvara of Ove Arup + Partners, has four primary goals:

- to create a design which is sustainable in its operation as a natural environment



- to harness and reuse inherent site resources
- to improve on-the-ground conditions for the comfort of Park users
- to "lead by example", creating opportunities for sustainable energy demonstrations

The soil will be returned to an agricultural potential, providing an optimal base for the landscape scheme without importing — or exporting — any natural soils. This will be accomplished by spreading compost over the site, and loosening soil with a vibrating subsoiler to 90 cm. depth (parallel to contours), then seeding the entire site with clover and turning it under (increasing nitrogen content), then seeding with wheat or barley, and turning it under. As a general condition, soil composition would be 5% organic material, 45% mineral soil, 25% water, 25% air, yielding a bulk density in the range of 0.96 g./cm.³ For comparison, the existing bulk soil density in open areas at Downsview, where the soil has become highly compacted, has been measured at approximately 2 g./cm.³, which is more typical of downtown urban conditions. At a bulk density of 1.16 g./cm.³ or greater, natural growth of roots is restricted.

With the proposed programme, the soil will have good drainage and be rich in nutrients and microbial life. Creation of good soil will not only facilitate plant establishment but will also reduce the need for future chemical fertilization. To provide variety in landscape conditions, a few sections of the site will be left with less complete drainage conditions, building on existing soil conditions for the establishment of wetlands.

Downsview Park is at a key point in the Southern Ontario watershed system — the eastern portion of the site drains to the Don River system and the western portion drains to the Humber River system. The goal is to physically connect the Downsview Park to both river systems through adjacent parkland ravines.

On completion, the 320-acre park will be approximately the size of Toronto's High Park. The entire former airbase area, including an additional 320 acres planned as a "corporate campus" (revenues from which will pay for the park) and approximately 360 acres currently being leased by Bombardier deHavilland for aircraft manufacture, totals approximately 1000 acres, which is similar in scale to Central Park in New York City.

The concept for the new Downsview Park, in the breadth and detail of its environmentally sustainable concepts, represents a new approach to landscape design. To quote from the jury report, the Tree City design proposes "a vision of future park lands as intriguing as a work of art," and "creates a new rapport between contemporary urban experience and the value of nature, as both are actively transformed."

This visionary approach establishes an important precedent through the creation of Canada's first urban national park.

David Oleson is a principal of Oleson Worland Architect in Toronto; a member of OAA's former Committee on the Environment; an Adjunct professor at the University of Toronto Faculty of Architecture, Landscape & Design; and a member of the core team for the Downsview Park competition winning submission.



Grow the Park

Tree City plants the seed for environmental expansion. In the broadest sense, Tree City is a campaign to grow beyond Downsview's boundaries and into the urban realm. It is the antithesis of the token green space. Rather than setting itself apart from the city like a trophy of environmentalism, Tree City trades a degree of toxicity for greater presence.